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ABSTRACT

More than 150 public relations practitioners responded to a survey designed to identify and clarify factors associated with evaluative research in public relations. Responses indicated that (1) no more than half the practitioners formally evaluate their public relations activities on a regular basis: (2) the majority of evaluation is done informally: (3) half the practitioners are not being told specifically by top management to evaluate their public relations activities: (4) practitioners working for single organizations and those working for public relations/advertising and consulting agencies practice their craft differently, evaluate different types of activities, and have different views about the effect of their evaluations on organizational policies: and (5) the majority of practitioners spend less than 5% of their budget on evaluating public relations activities. More research is needed to investigate such areas as management's role in public relations evaluation, factors that account for differences in the practice and evaluation of public relations activities, and the concept of organizational effectiveness. It should not be assumed that formal evaluation procedures are always necessary: under certain conditions, informal procedures may be as effective or more effective. (GT)

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Public Relations Division

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH EVALUATING PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

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FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH EVALUATING PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

By Mark P. McElreath, University of Maryland

Practitioners and academicians regularly call for more and better research in the field of public relations.[1] Most recently, there has been a surge of interest and activity in evaluating public relations activities and integrating such activities into the management sciences.[2] The underlying message in many of these "clarion calls" is that practitioners and scholars need to avoid the "soft" approaches of the humanities and to embrace the latest in scientific hardware and to apply the newest techniques and methodologies from the social and natural sciences.[3]

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a nationwide survey of public relations practitioners that provides one set of benchmarks about the amount of formal research being conducted in the field today. No assumption is made in this analysis, however, that formal research is better than informal research, or that formal research is the same thing as scientific research. The purpose of this paper is to identify and clarify factors associated with evaluative research in public relations, to consider alternative explanations for these findings, and to discuss briefly what it means to be scientific about the practice and analysis of public relations. Although this paper probably raises more questions than it answers, the survey was designed specifically to answer these questions:

*What kinds of practitioners frequently evaluate public relations activities?

*How much attention is top management giving to measuring the effectiveness of public relations?

*What are the more frequently performed public relations activities engaged in by agency people and practitioners working for single organizations and how often do they evaluate these activities?

*How much money do most practitioners spend on evaluating public relations activities?

*Do practitioners appreciate being told by top management to evaluate specific public relations activities?

*What other factors are associated with measuring the effectiveness of public relations?

The Study

Funded in part by the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education, the study was based on a combined mail and telephone survey conducted in the fall of 1979 of a randomly selected group of practitioners active in the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA).[4]

The sample of practitioners is not representative of all public relations practitioners; it is representative of professionally active practitioners in the United States. Of 240 randomly selected members of PRSA, 47.5% completed a telephone interview, and 26% responded to the mail questionnaire. The small sample size means that the percentages reported here are, at a 95% confidence level, accurate plus or minus 13%. The low response rate does not mean the sampling error cannot be calculated (any more than such a concern would apply to a 95% response rate) or that the sample is less than representative; it does mean the sample may be biased in favor of finding as much activity and interest in evaluation as can be found in the field of public relations. During telephone interviews, some respondents said the reason they were not returning the mail questionnaires was because they were swamped with other questionnaires and simply didn't have enough time to fill them out. This suggests that those who did respond to this survey did have enough time and interest in the subject matter to complete the survey instruments; however, this is speculation.

To validate the representativeness of the sample of PRSA members who returned usable questionnaires, a comparison was made between the demographics of this survey sample and a much larger sample of PRSA members produced by a membership survey conducted by the society in 1977. Table 1 indicates the sample for this survey may be slightly older, better paid and better educated than the average member of PRSA; however,

these differences are not statistically significant. Members of PRSA, one of the largest professional societies in the field of public relations, are (by definition) more professionally active than nonmembers; therefore, the findings of this study are generalizable to the more professionally active practitioners of public relations in the United States today.

The dependent variable for much of this analysis--the degree of formal research conducted before and after a public relations program--was conceptually defined by the respondents: "formal" or "informal" research was whatever a respondent thought; and, obviously, what one respondent thinks of as formal may be considered quite informal by someone else. The dependent variable was operationally defined on a four-point scale, ranging from "frequently" to "never" (see the first four items in Table 4).

The Findings

No more than half of today's practitioners formally evaluate their public relations activities on a regular basis (see Table 2). Most of the evaluation that is done--and the majority of today's practitioners do evaluate their work--is done informally.

One possible reason for the lack of evaluation is that half of the practitioners working today are not being told specifically by top management to evaluate their public relations activities (see Table 3). Asked to describe an activity they had evaluated, 50% said they received no mandate from top management to do the evaluation; rather, they commented that they evaluated the activity for their own reasons, primarily to improve their operations and because they knew without being told that they had to justify their work.

Practitioners working for single organizations and practitioners working for public relations/advertising and consulting agencies practice their craft differently (see Table 4). Agency people spend much more time and effort counseling top management; contacting opinion leaders, preparing institutional ads, and conducting formal and informal research to evaluate their public relations activities than do their colleagues working for single organizations. The kinds of public relations activities that agency people spend most of their time evaluating are press releases, company publications, lobbying efforts and contacts with the media. A top priority for practitioners working for single firms is to know how to evaluate their company publications.

Asked to assess the impact their evaluations had on organizational policies, agency people said their evaluations of public relations activities were just as likely to affect general and specific policies, while practitioners working for single firms indicated their evaluations

were more likely to influence more specific organizational policies (see Table 3).

Among the practitioners surveyed, the more money they spent on evaluating public relations activities, the more time they spent counseling management (see Table 5). For large product-producing firms with more than 1,000 employees (N=11), most invest less than one percent of their organization's total operating budget on public relations activities (see Table 3). The vast majority of public relations practitioners in the United States today spend less than five percent of their budget on evaluating public relations activities (see Table 3).

There is an association that indicates that the more formal research a public relations specialist engages in, the more likely that person will perceive top management as being good at anticipating problems; or, vice versa (see Table 6).

Asked to offer advice to others interested in evaluating their public relations activities, some respondents said:

> "Avoid protecting 'pet projects' in evaluation sessions: let critiquers see that their input will be taken seriously."
>
> "Before you start any given project, set down in writing the goals and the obstacles--and how you will overcome those obstacles."
>
> "The data base must be broad enough and activities of consistent enough nature to justify the research costs, which are not inconsiderable."

Asked to explain why they did not evaluate their work very often, most respondents said they lacked the proper education and training in evaluative research. Two respondents said:

> "Some of the most sensitive areas of public relations do not lend themselves to the kind of evaluation sought by those who sleep better at night because of some quantification of the unquantifiable. Remember those body counts that told us how well we were doing in Vietnam?"

> "We usually don't care to know why we won; it can deprive us of some of the pleasure of winning; and we don't care to know why we lost--it might hurt too much or fix blame."

Discussion

The study was a cross-sectional survey of PRSA members. While the findings describe certain practices in measuring the effectiveness of public relations, the findings cannot be used to answer how or why practitioners do or do not evaluate their activities. This study has identified some important factors associated with measuring the effectiveness of public relations; it has not tested various alternative explanations for these associations. These research questions, suggested by this study, remain to be answered:

1. Which comes first, the favorable attitude toward top management, or conducting formal evaluations of public relations activities? It may be that initially practitioners do not appreciate the pressures to evaluate their activities; but, after doing the research for a while and becoming more comfortable with the process and management's expectations, the practitioner then perceives management's intervention as a sign of a concerned, forward-thinking group.
2. Which comes first, spending more money on evaluating public relations activities, or spending more time counseling top management? One might think that if you spend more money evaluating your activities, you will spend more time counseling top management. It could be that people spending a lot of time counseling top management are more likely to get authorization to spend more money evaluating their activities. Having ready access to top management may actually precede investing more money in evaluating public relations activities. Some third factor (for example, the scope of the practitioner's responsibilities) may account for both the time spent counseling top

management and evaluating public relations activities.

3. Why do agency public relations specialists say their evaluation activities have more impact than do practitioners working for single firms? The findings from this study may indicate in-house evaluations of public relations activities have less overall influence on organizational decision-making than evaluations conducted by outside consultants. The findings may also indicate that agency people perceive their evaluations as having more general implications for their clients, and that practitioners working for single firms recognize their evaluations are focused on only one set of activities being engaged in by their organizations.

4. What other factors, in addition to working for an agency or working for a single firm, might account for differences in the practice and evaluation of public relations activities? For example, do practices vary according to the size of the organization, its technology, its competitive environment? No apparent differences were found in this study when these factors were accounted for; but, small sample-size variances probably washed out real differences in the population that have been examined by others who found that public relations practices do, in fact, vary according to role expectations and other organizational and environmental factors.[5]

5. Under what conditions, in what kind of situation is a practitioner most likely to evaluate specific public relations activities? Agency people, serving several clients who all expect their money's worth--or the clients will take their business elsewhere--must learn how to evaluate their activities

and to report the results to their clients. They do this much more often than do practitioners working for a single firm. The findings from this study indicate that top management expectations may be crucial in explaining when and why practitioners evaluate their work. Then, the question becomes: under what conditions, in what kind of situation is top management most likely to expect public relations activities to be evaluated? Organizations performing essential services (utilities, school systems), dominating a marketplace (the Bell System, IBM) and extremely large concerns (General Motors, Mobil) may have the appropriate combination of slack resources and public pressures for accountability that puts management in a better position to initiate and follow through with a formal evaluation of public relations activities. Without appropriate pressures and without appropriate resources, organizations are not likely to evaluate their own public relations activities.

Future research in the area of measuring the effectiveness of public relations must address the theoretical and methodological problems surrounding the concept of organizational effectiveness.[6] What exactly is public relations effectiveness? If defined as the achievement of goals, the question becomes: who defines the goals when measuring the effectiveness of public relations? A goal-achievement concept of organizational effectiveness means taking into consideration the consensus-building process for developing goals and the number of constituents who have significant inputs into this process. Effectiveness defined as the achievement of goals is ultimately very subjective. Defining effectiveness as the achievement of public relations goals is useful from a practitioner's point of view, for it allows (or forces) the practitioner to take into

consideration the many publics influencing the organization's behavior.

However, the goal-achievement concept of public relations effectiveness may not be useful in building scientific theories about public relations and organizational behavior. Goals are forever being adjusted in complex organizations and are cast as long-term, short-term or intermediate: how can these several variables be controlled when comparing the effectiveness of several organizations (or organizational subunits) without creating more conceptual confusion? Measuring goal-achievement one way may be fine for some organizations; but, whatever the criteria, they will not be easily applied to all organizations.

Of greater use to theory builders is the systems approach to defining organizational effectiveness which focuses on how well an organization controls resources and adapts to its environment: survivability becomes the criterion for organizational effectiveness. From this point of view, an organization would have effective public relations if over time it was able to continue its operations. Survivability as the criterion for effectiveness also has conceptual and methodological problems (but, notice that the subjective problems of reaching consensus on criteria for multiple goals are eliminated). For example, some organizations which do not survive do not die quick deaths (bankruptcy procedures often are drawn out affairs with fuzzy conclusions) or may not be dead actually (rather they have been taken over by someone else or simply have changed their names). To develop theories applicable to as many organizations as possible will mean investigating relationships among factors associated with public relations effectiveness across large numbers of organizations and using concepts of effectiveness that are as generalizable as possible. More attention needs to be given in the future to the concept of effectiveness by those of us interested in knowing more about measuring the

effectiveness of public relations.

In this study, criteria for effectiveness were not considered specifically. The study only looked at whether or not practitioners evaluated their public relations activities. How practitioners define and measure effectiveness needs to be investigated.

Once acceptable criteria for effectiveness are identified, it would be possible to examine the linkage between organizational effectiveness and the degree of research being conducted in the field of public relations. To say that frequently conducting formal research in public relations leads to increased organizational effectiveness is a testable proposition--and, it should be investigated; however, it should not be assumed by such a statement that conducting formal research is the same thing as "being scientific."

Being scientific should not be confused with using any one type of methodology, be it formal or informal. Being scientific means seeking to identify and clarify relationships in nature; it means building and testing theories about nature.[7] A mature science is one that has a well developed set of theories (or, ideally, one unifying theory) that others can verify.[8]

Young scientists often become infatuated with certain techniques and methodologies, for there are fads in science just as there are fads in bluejeans. But, senior scientists (and this has nothing to do with age) seek to achieve understanding and knowledge by whatever means seem logical and ethical.

A mature science is one that recognizes that there is no one best way of knowing; there is no one best way of coming to grips with reality; there is no one best way of realistically describing, explaining or

predicting nature. Consequently, a mature science accepts insights into the causes, processes and effects of phenomena from wherever these insights might come.[9]

It would be simplistic to argue that only by formally and systematically collecting data that test specific hypotheses can the practice of public relations be effective and grow professionally or scientifically. If nothing else, such an argument flies in the face of reality; for it is often possible for a single, savvy public relations consultant to come up with similar recommendations as a team of specialists engaging in a costly piece of "scientific" research; or for an academic researcher using a large sample and the latest statistical techniques to end up with the same set of testable generalizations about public relations as a historian using the case study method.

The "soft" feeling-awareness approach of the humanities--of relating in often artistic and imaginative ways natural and supernatural phenomena to the human experience, without necessarily attempting to establish generalizable "truths" about reality--can serve in very positive ways the more cognitive-rational activities of the scientific process. The "soft" approach of the humanities can serve as a source of ideas and as a way of communicating scientific findings.

What is essential to the scientific process is not the methodologies used to verify propositions but that natural phenomena be conceptualized in such a way--and there is no one best way of doing this--so that statements of relationships between and among key concepts can be identified, clarified and verified. No single approach--be it the soft approach of the humanities, the hard approach of the physical sciences, or the mushy middle ground of the social sciences--should be thought of as the best way to reflect, predict and explain reality. However, unless

the approaches used are theory-based, unless concepts are consistently defined and "facts" about these concepts build up, it is doubtful if a body of knowledge--the hallmark of a mature science--will develop.

Conclusion

This study found that probably less than half of the public relations practitioners working today in the United States formally evaluate their work with any frequency--only ten percent said they do it often. Although most practitioners assume they have to justify their work, only half of them are told specifically to evaluate what they do. Those who more frequently evaluate their work tend to be working for public relations/advertising and consulting agencies and for organizations where the practitioner says top management is good at anticipating problems.

More research is needed to investigate individual, organizational and environmental differences that may explain why these factors are associated with measuring the effectiveness of public relations. In the meantime, we should not assume that formal procedures for measuring the effectiveness of public relations are necessary in all instances for professional growth or organizational effectiveness; informal procedures may be just as effective, if not better, under certain conditions.

For the professional and scientific growth of the field of public relations, we need to find out when, where and how much theory-based work is being engaged in by practitioners and scholars. And we need to know how to increase such theory-based effort in public relations.

If public relations practitioners and academicians are to assist in the scientific development of the field, they should heed the following commandments of Bentley Glsss for today's ethical scientist:

1) To cherish complete truthfulness;

2) To avoid self-aggrandizement at the expense of one's fellow scientist;

3) Fearlessly to defend the freedom of scientific inquiry and opinion; and,

4) Fully to communicate one's findings through primary publication, synthesis and instruction.[10]

FOOTNOTES

1. See Public Relations Journal 35:7, July, 1979, for a series of articles by various authors about "Measuring public relations effectiveness."

2. An annual compilation of research by management scientists can be found in Research in Corporate Social Performance and Policy, edited by Lee Preston (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press; Vol. 1, 1978; Vol. 2, 1980). Public relations practitioners and communication researchers discuss "Measuring the effectiveness of public relations" in a special issue of Public Relations Review 3:4, Winter, 1977.

3. See specifically Otto Lerbinger, "Corporate use of research in public relations," pp. 11-19; and James F. Tirone, "Measuring the Bell System's Public Relations," pp. 21-38; both in Public Relations Review 3:4, Winter 1977. Two exceptional discussions are: Judy Kulstad Van Slyke, "Defining public relations: toward a theory of science," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, August, 1980; and, James E. Grunig, "An evaluation of academic research in public relations," Public Relations Review 2:1 pp.31-43, 1976.

4. In addition to acknowledging the Foundation, the author also would like to acknowledge the support of the University of Maryland Computer Science Center, and to thank the students enrolled in his fall 1979 public opinion/survey research course at the College of Journalism.

5. Mary Ann Ferguson, "Some empirically-generated public relations roles and association with various descriptive variables," Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, August, 1979; Glen M. Broom and George D. Smith, "Testing the practitioner's impact on clients." Public Relations Review 5:3, pp. 47-59, Fall, 1979; see also, Strategic Management, edited by Daniel E. Schendel and Charles W. Hofer (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979).

6. A variety of authors address this topic in New Perspectives on organizational effectiveness, by Paul S. Goodman, Johannes M. Pennings and associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979).

7. For an excellent and quick discussion of the concept of science, see Richard Schlegel, Inquiry into science: its domain and limits (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972). For specifics on theory-building, see Jerald Hage Techniques and problems of theory construction in sociology (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972.

8. Abraham Kaplan, The conduct of inquiry (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1964) specifically "Scientific method in behavioral science," pp. 27-33.

9. Jerome R. Ravetz, Scientific knowledge and its social problems (London, Clarendon Press, 1971).

10. Bentley Glass, Science and ethical values (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965) pp. 97.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Factor	1977 Sample[a] (N=4,516)	1979 Sample[b] (N=62)
Age		
30 and younger	10%	8%
30-40	26	31
40-50	28	23
50-60	26	31
60 and older	10	8
Salary		
Up to $15,000	13%	7%
$16-20,000	16	5
$21-25,000	19	10
$26-35,000	26	39
$36-50,000	17	29
$51-75,000	7	6
$75,000+	3	4
Education[c]		
College Degree		35%
Graduate Work		31
Graduate Degree		29

a. More than 50% membership responded to survey reported in PRSA National Newsletter, Vol., No.5, May, 1978.

b. Based on 1979 PRSA Directory, only those members living in the United States.

c. Another 1979 survey indicated 88% PRSA members had a college degree or more, compared to 95% here; see: Don Wright, "The effect of accreditation on professionalism," Public Relations Review 6:2, Summer, 1980.

Table 2. Percentage of practitioners who engage in specific public relations activities

Public Relations Activity	Single Firms (N=39)	
	Rarely or Never	Often or Sometimes
Conducting formal research before beginning a project	63%	37%
Conducting a formal evaluation of a project	61	39
Conducting informal research before beginning a project	24	76
Conducting an informal evaluation of a project	27	73
Writing press releases	5	95
Preparing house publication	7	93
Making informal contacts with the media	2	98
Holding press conferences and other formal contacts with the media	29	71
Making informal contacts with the public	2	98
Contacting "opinion leaders"	10	90
Staging events	20	80
Preparing videotape, AV materials	39	61
Preparing institutional advertisements	27	73
Counseling top management	5	95
Contacting government officials; lobbying	27	73
Writing speeches	5	95

Table 3. Factors related to evaluating public relations activities

Factors	Agencies (N=20)	Single Firms (N=39)
Mandate from management to evaluate activities		
An expressed mandate	50%	50%
There was no mandate	50	50
Perceived impact of evaluation		
On specific policies	50	63
On general policies	50	37
Percentage of PR budget to total operating budget*		
1 to 5%		27
Less than 1$		73
Percent of PR budget spent on evaluation		
Less than 3%		67
3-5%		18
More than 5%		15

*N=11 due to missing data; all product-producing firms.

Table 4. Percentage of practitioners who rarely or never evaluate specific public relations activities

Public Relations Activity	Agencies (N=20)	Single Firms (N=39)	Probability*
Conducting formal research before beginning a project	47%	72%	(.058)
Conducting a formal evaluation of a project	67	65	
Conducting informal research before beginning a project	37	61	(.047)
Conducting an informal evaluation of a project	34	54	
Writing press releases	32	49	
Preparing house publications	37	29	
Making informal contacts with the media	42	40	
Holding press conferences and other formal contacts with the media	21	63	
Making informal contacts with the public	50	55	
Contacting "opinion leaders"	26	47	(.079)
Staging events	16	50	
Preparing videotape, AV materials	31	55	
Preparing institutional advertisements	50	71	(.039)
Counseling top management	28	49	(.031)
Contacting government officials: lobbying	45	45	
Writing speeches	40	63	

*Probabilities for T-tests (using means based on 4-pt scale from frequently and sometimes to rarely and never) with separate variance estimates.

Table 5. Percentage of public relations budget spent on evaluative research and the amount of time spent counseling top management

	Frequency of Counseling Top Management		
	Often	Sometimes	
Less than 5%	8	18	26
More than 5%	10	4	14
	18	22	40

$X^2=6.07$ with 1df; $p<.05$

Table 6. Frequency of conducting formal evaluations and respondent's perception of management's ability to anticipate problems

Perception of top management's ability to anticipate problems		Frequency of Evaluation: Often/Sometimes	Rarely/Never	
	Good	6	4	10
	Fair	7	21	28
		13	25	38

$X^2 = 3.99$ with 1df; $p < .05$.